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PERCEIVED IMPACT OF UNIVERSITY RANKINGS ON UNDERGRADUATES' CHOICE OF UNIVERSITY: STUDY OF UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study seeks to provide insight into the impact of university rankings on University of Lagos undergraduates' choice of university. A descriptive survey design was adopted for the study and a questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. Using the Raosoft sample size calculator, a sample of 381 was selected from 43,784 students. It was revealed that these rankings had influence students ' choice of university. Results show that the students perceived the University of Lagos to have a good reputation and that influenced their choice of university. Moreover, the study showed that university rankings and have become important tools employed by students to choose their preferred university, and popular university rankings among these students are the National Universities Commission's University Ranking and Web of University Cybermetrics. It was concluded that university ranking is an important tool for marketing higher institutions. Hence, university managements are encouraged to be purposeful in ensuring they put their universities on a good pedestal on the university ranking and not forgetting to instigate the university's reputation in the course of that.

Keywords: University ranking; Choice of University; National Universities Commission; University Cybermetrics

INTRODUCTION

The education system in Nigeria is 9-3-4, which involves pupils/students graduating from one stage to the other in a linear progressive fashion. The first nine years represent the "Basic School" level, the following three years represent the "Senior Secondary School" level, and the last four years stand for the "University (bachelor's degree)" level. Some various factors and considerations may determine the choice of the next institution of learning for a student. It is observed that Nigerian parents/guardians are majorly the ones that decide what choice of schools for their children/ward at Basic School and Senior Secondary School levels. This may be

because, at that stage, most of the students/wards have not attained their teen. Hence, it is generally believed that they cannot be trusted with decision-making as to choices. However, students are believed to be of age by the time they are to apply to universities for admission.

Universities are established to train students into becoming experts in their various fields or disciplines (Ifeanyi, Oluseye, Maria, Folorunsho, Tamarapreye, & Peter, 2019). This means that they train students to become professionals and specialists in various disciplines. Therefore, it is expedient for students to make the somewhat life-changing decision of choosing a preferred choice of universities as they progress in career and life. Students are faced with the painstaking task of choosing a university and course of study, which may largely determine their career path. Several factors considered by students are usually attributive of universities. University ranking and reputation are deemed good tools used by students to choose their preferred university of choice. However, reputation management is still a complex issue as the image held by some of the stakeholders is an antithesis to what the university wishes to project (Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando, Zorril, & Forcadaa, 2018). Meanwhile, there has been little attention paid to examining university reputation in academic research which may be as a result of the little or no activity on the part of the university in managing their reputation (Curtis, Abratt, & Minor, 2009; Aghaz, Hashemi, & Sharifi-Atashgah, 2015; Wilkins & Huisman, 2015).

Nigerian universities are known to use their ranking to promote their status and credibility. In other words, university ranking has become a marketing tool in the hands of universities in Nigeria. Owing to the importance attached to university ranking, the ranking often generates a lot of media attention. This provides growing popularity of these rankings among Nigerian students. Moreover, knowing how media mold the opinion of people, it is possible that high university ranking influences the choice of Nigerian students in selecting preferred universities for admission. There are various studies (Ifeanyi *et al.*, 2019; Adeyanju, Mogaji, Olusola, & Oyinlola, 2020) on students' choice of universities in Nigeria. However, with the growing importance attached to university ranking, there is no understanding of the impact it has on the choice of the university among students in Nigeria. It is based on this foregoing that this study seeks to examine the influence of university ranking and reputation on students' choice of university.

Galandaci, Muaz and Mukhtar (2016) reported that the best-known university rankings around the world include the Academic Ranking of World University; the Quacquarelli Symonds

(QS) Ranking; the Time Higher Education World Universities Ranking; the SCImago Institution Ranking; the Leiden World Ranking; the Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for world universities; the ranking of the Web of World universities and the Web of Universities of Cybermetrics Ranking. The local ranking of universities in Nigeria is that of the National Universities Commission (NUC) universities' ranking. Be that as it may, the broad objective of the study is to examine the impact of university ranking on Nigerian students' choice of the university from the evidence presented by the University of Lagos (UNILAG) undergraduates. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine the perceived reputation of the University of Lagos among undergraduates;
2. Examine whether undergraduate students of the University of Lagos are aware of various university ranking platforms; and
3. Ascertain the influence of university ranking on students' choice of university.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

In the last decades, university ranking has garnered a lot of significance in Nigeria owing to the necessity to have tools that can be used for management, policymaking, grant location, quality assurance, quality assessment, quality improvement, benchmarking and sustainability among other factors (Stolz, Hendel, & Horn, 2010). Research output is one very important element that ought to be used in comparing universities. However, laymen and admission seekers into undergraduate programs most likely do not have the prerequisite knowledge to go about using research output as comparative tools to determine which university is best for their learning. Amidst all these, university ranking is a comprehensible tool that can be used by students to comparatively determine their choice of university. Johnes (2018) corroborated that university rankings are used by various stakeholders in higher education. All the university ranking groups have different metrics they use in assessing universities. It is a transparent and effective mechanism that can be employed by the government and its agencies to identify universities with standout performance in the various metrics used for the ranking (Okebukola, 2011). Students may use these university rankings to determine their preferred choice of university.

It is noteworthy that university ranking is observed to be seen as an essential characteristic of a university. Adeyanju, Mogaji, Olusola, and Oyinlola (2020) noted that university ranking is one of the characteristics of a university alongside university reputation and

specialized program offered. This underpins how much importance university ranking has grown in higher education over the years. Contextually, in Nigeria, you have university students vigorously arguing about which university is the best. Most times, the common tenable argument adopted by the students is often the university ranking reports.

More crucially, it is established that the choice of universities and decision-making are often influenced by various factors. Some studies (Adeyanju, *et al.*, 2020; Hieu, Xuyen, & Hung, 2020; Matsolo, Ningpuanyeh, & Susuman, 2016) focused on the factors that influence the choice of universities. Those studies, however, did not focus on the influence of university ranking and reputation on students' choice of university. Noteworthy among the few studies that focus on the influence of university ranking and reputation on students' choice of university was Avravel, Rykhtik, Baluev, and Efimova (2016) that carried out a study in Lobachevsky University, Russia, which examined students' awareness of the world rankings of universities and their importance in their choice of university. The findings of the study show that more than half of the students were not aware of various university rankings. It was further shown that only 20% of the students have heard about QS World University Rankings for the first time. It was revealed that the state of awareness of the students influences their choice of university. This shows that students' lack of awareness about university rankings may impact their choice of university.

Adeyanju *et al.* (2020) carried out a study on factors influencing students' choice of federal universities in Nigeria using the Federal University of Technology, Akure, (FUTA) as a case study. It was found that university ranking influenced students' choice of university. However, it was revealed that university reputation had more influence on students' choice of university than university ranking. In Nigeria, university reputation is usually spurred by factors such as year of establishment, rave review of alumni in their various walks of life, the caliber of current students, and awards/recognition. However, university ranking has been adopted in recent years as a tool to boost reputation among Nigerian universities. In a study of the undergraduate from five universities in three cities of Central Punjab, it was found that Higher Education Commission ranking and reputation were part of the important predictors of students' choice of the university (Sabir, *et al.*, 2013).

Budur, Rasihd and Poturak (2018) investigated students' perception of university choice and decision-making in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The study employed variables such as scientific activities, campus facilities and scholarship to determine university reputation. It was

found that scientific activities and campus facilities determine university reputation. Similarly, Agrey and Lampadan (2014) examined determinants factors contributing to students' choice in selecting a university. It was found that the reputation of the institution is important to the students. It was noted that reputation takes years to built and that universities should strive for a positive reputation both locally and internationally. This will help attract students from within and beyond the country in which the university is sited. It was noted that university reputation is one of the factors that is adopted for university marketing strategies to boost recognition (Ho & Hung, 2008). Kusumawati, Yanamandram, and Perera (2010) found that university reputation influences students' choice of public universities in Indonesia. Meanwhile, Bastedo and Bowman (2010); and Bowman and Bastedo (2011) emphasized the influence university rankings have on the development of university reputation. It was established in these studies that university rankings have an influence on potential university reputational assessments by stakeholders.

Ifeanyi *et al.* (2019) developed a scale for conceptualizing students' choice of higher education and showed that elements of university reputation include academic excellence, skilled lecturers, highly employed graduate rates in Nigeria, technology and quality of learning facilities and its entire infrastructure.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study, using a quantitative research method. According to the Academic Planning Unit of the University of Lagos (2020/2021 session), the total population of undergraduate students of the University of Lagos, Akoka, Nigeria was 43,784. Using the Raosoft sample size calculator at a confidence level of 95%, the sample size of 381 was selected for the study. A simple random sampling technique was adopted. A questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. Collected data were subjected to descriptive statistics of frequency count and percentage.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Based on the total number of responses collected, the total unit of analysis for the study is 381. Collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics employed are frequency counts and simple percentages.

Table 1: Demographic information of respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	211	55.4

Female	170	44.6
Total	381	100%
Age		
Below 20 years	177	46.5
21-25 years	108	28.3
26-30 years	71	18.6
31 years and above	25	6.6
Total	381	100%
Level of Study		
100 level	73	19.2
200 level	98	25.7
300 level	116	30.5
400 level	63	16.5
500 level	31	8.1
Total	381	100%

Source: Authors' Fieldwork (2020)

Table 1 shows that most of the respondents (55.4%) were male, with female (44.6%) respondents constituting less than half. It was shown in the Table that the majority (74.8%) of the respondents were 25 years old or less. It was shown that the meager (6.6%) percentage of the respondents were 31 years and above. This highlights that most of the students were youthful. Meanwhile, it can be seen in Table 1 that 19.2% of the respondents were in 100 level, 25.7% were in 200 level, 30.5% were in 300 level, 16.5% were in 400 level and 8.1% were in 500 level. This signifies that only 200 level and 300 level students had over one-quarter of representation among the respondents of the study.

Table 2: University of Lagos undergraduates' perception of their university reputation

Items	Responses									
	Extremely Good		Very Good		Moderately Good		Slightly Good		Not Good	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Academic excellence	177	46.4	91	23.9	30	7.9	51	13.4	32	8.4
Skilled lecturers	109	28.6	122	32.0	25	6.6	49	12.9	76	19.9
Highly employed graduate rates	93	24.4	158	41.4	59	15.5	30	7.9	41	10.8
Technology application to learning	79	20.7	65	17.1	45	11.8	31	8.1	161	42.3
Quality of learning	182	47.8	107	28.1	32	8.4	42	11.0	18	4.7
Learning facilities	53	13.9	75	19.7	101	26.5	123	32.3	29	7.6

Source: Author's Fieldwork (2020)

Table 2 illustrates that 46.4% of the respondents perceived the academic excellence at the University of Lagos to be extremely good, 23.9% noted it was very good, 7.9% saw it to be moderately good, 13.4% noted that it was slightly good and 8.4% concede that it was not good.

This implies that more than half of the respondents perceived the academic excellence of the University of Lagos to be good. It can be seen in Table 2 that 28.6% of the respondents perceived that there are extremely good skilled lecturers in the University of Lagos, 32.0% concede that it was very good, 6.6% noted that it was moderately good, 12.9% perceived it to be slightly good and 19.9% perceived it not to be good. This means that more than half perceived that there are skilled lecturers at the University of Lagos.

It can be seen in Table 2 also that 24.4% of the respondents perceived that high employed graduate rates of the University of Lagos are extremely good, 41.4% noted that it was very good, 15.5% noted that it was moderately good, 7.9% noted that it was slightly good and 10.8% noted that it was not good. This implies that more than half of the respondents perceived the rate of employed graduates to be good. Moreover, it can be seen in the Table that 20.7% perceived application of technology to learning was extremely good, 17.1% noted that it was very good, 11.8% noted that it was moderately good, 8.1% noted that it was slightly good and 42.3% noted that it was not good. This shows that more than half of the respondents did not perceive technology application to learning at the University of Lagos to be very good. Table 3 shows that 47.8% of the respondents perceived the quality of learning at the University of Lagos to be extremely good, 28.1% noted that it was very good, 8.4% noted that it was moderately good, 11.0% noted that it was slightly good and 4.7% noted that it was not good. This implies that more than half of the respondents perceived the quality of learning at the University of Lagos to be very good.

Table 3: University of Lagos undergraduates’ awareness of various university rankings

Items	Responses									
	Extremely Aware		Very Aware		Moderately Aware		Slightly Aware		Not Aware	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Academic Ranking of World Universities	25	6.6	37	9.7	61	16.0	108	28.3	150	39.4
Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) National Universities Commission’s Universities Ranking	12	3.2	20	5.2	34	8.9	72	18.9	243	63.8
SCImago Institution Ranking	64	16.8	81	21.3	55	14.4	102	26.8	79	20.7
Leiden World Ranking	15	3.9	13	3.4	59	15.4	96	25.2	198	52.0

Web of University Cybermetrics	207	54.3	95	24.9	48	12.6	19	5.0	12	3.2
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Source: Author’s Fieldwork (2020)

Table 3 highlights that 6.6% of the respondents were extremely aware of the Academic Ranking of Universities Quacquarelli, 9.7% were very aware, 16.0% were moderately aware, 28.3% were slightly aware while 39.4% were not aware. This indicates that the respondents' awareness of the Academic Ranking of World Universities is not adequate as more than half of them were either not aware or slightly aware of it. It can be seen in Table 2 that 3.2% of the respondents were extremely aware of Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), 5.2% were very aware, 8.9% were moderately aware, 18.9% were slightly aware and 63.8% were not aware. This shows that most of the respondents were not aware of Quacquarelli Symonds (QS).

Table 2 reflects that 52.0% of the respondents were aware of extremely aware of National Universities Commission’s universities ranking, 20.0% were very aware, 13.1% were moderately aware, 4.7% were slightly aware and 10.2% were not aware. This implies that more than half of the respondents were aware of National Universities Commission’s universities ranking. It can also be seen in the Table that 2.9% were extremely aware of Leiden World Ranking, 3.4% were very aware, 15.4% were moderately aware, 25.2% were slightly aware and 52.0% were not aware. This implies that most of the respondents were not aware of the Leiden World Ranking. Table 2 illustrates that 54.3% of the respondents were extremely aware of Web of University Cybermetrics, 24.9% were very aware, 12.6% were moderately aware, 5.0% were slightly aware and 3.2% were not aware. This shows that more than half of the respondents were extremely aware of Web of University Cybermetrics.

Table 4: Influence of UNILAG ranking on students’ choice of university

Items	Responses									
	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Academic Ranking of World Universities ranking influences choice of university	85	22.3	119	31.2	42	11.0	76	20.0	59	15.5
Quacquarelli Symonds ranking influences choice of university	42	11.0	26	6.8	60	15.8	133	34.9	120	31.5
National Universities Commission’s	135	35.4	102	26.8	25	6.6	48	12.6	71	18.6

universities ranking influences choice of university												
SCImago Institution ranking influences choice of university	73	19.2	94	24.7	44	11.6	77	20.2	93	24.5		
Leiden World Ranking influences the choice of university	35	9.2	57	15.0	29	7.6	114	29.9	146	38.3		
Web of University Cybermetrics influences the choice of university	118	31.0	103	27.0	36	9.5	55	14.4	69	18.1		

Source: Author's Fieldwork (2020) (N.B.: SA+A=A, SD+D=D)

Table 4 shows that 53.5% of the respondents agreed that the Academic Ranking of World Universities ranking influenced their choice of university, 11.0% were neutral and 35.5% disagreed. This implies that more than half of the respondents agreed that the Academic Ranking of World Universities ranking influenced their choice of the university. It can be seen in Table 4 that 17.8% of the respondents agreed that Quacquarelli Symonds's ranking influenced their choice of university, 15.8% were neutral and 66.4% disagreed. This indicates that two-third of the respondents disagreed that Quacquarelli Symonds's ranking influenced their choice of university. Furthermore, it can be seen in the Table that 62.2% agreed that National Universities Commission's universities ranking influenced their choice of university, 6.6% were neutral and 31.2% disagreed. This signifies that more than half of the respondents agreed that National Universities Commission's universities ranking influenced their choice of university.

Table 4 shows that 43.9% of the respondents agreed that SCImago Institution ranking influenced their choice of university, 11.6% were neutral and 44.7% disagreed. This indicates that it is not clear whether half of the respondents see SCImago Institution ranking as much influence in their choice of university. Furthermore, it can be seen in Table 4 that 24.2% agreed that Leiden World Ranking influenced their choice of university, 7.6% were neutral and 58.2% disagreed. This shows that more than half of the respondents disagreed that Leiden World Ranking influenced their choice of university. Table 4 illustrates that 58.0% of the respondents agreed that Web of University Cybermetrics influenced their choice of university, 9.5% were neutral and 32.5% disagreed. This implies that more than half of the respondents agreed that the Web of University Cybermetrics influenced their choice of university

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study revealed that more than half of University of Lagos students were aware of the National Universities Commission's universities ranking and Web of University Cybermetrics. It was however shown in the findings that most of the students were not aware of Leiden World Ranking. Results show that more than half of the students were not aware of the Academic Ranking of World Universities and Quacquarelli Symonds (QS). This corroborated the findings of Avravel *et al.* (2016) where students at Lobachevsky University, Russia, were not aware of QS ranking. However, at the University of Lagos, Nigeria; it was shown that undergraduates were aware of other university ranking platforms like the National Universities Commission's universities ranking and Web of University Cybermetrics. This means that these two rankings were the most popular among University of Lagos undergraduates. Going through the literature, the study by Avravel *et al.* (2016) was the only one that seeks to provide insight into students' awareness of university rankings. However, the study was carried out in Russia, a more developed European country compared to the developing country, Nigeria, where this study was carried out.

Meanwhile, the findings of the study show that such university rankings like Academic Ranking of World Universities, National Universities Commission's universities ranking and Web of University Cybermetrics influenced undergraduates' choice of university. Meanwhile, the findings of the study show that QS ranking and Leiden World ranking did not have a strong influence on students' choice of the university during their admission process. This is dissimilar to the findings of Avravel *et al.* (2016) that pinpointed that awareness of students about QS ranking influences their choice of university. This supports Johnes's (2018) assertion that university rankings are used by all stakeholders in higher education, with the students inclusive. Furthermore, it was shown by Sabir *et al.* (2013) that university ranking influences students' choice of university in Central Punjab, Pakistan.

Results of this study show that academic excellence, skilled lectures, rate of employed graduates and quality of learning were considered to be good by more than half of the students. However, the findings of the study show that more than half of the students did not perceive technology application for learning to be very good at the University of Lagos, Nigeria. The findings of this study show that academic excellence, high rate of employed graduates, technology application to learning, learning facilities and quality of learning influenced

undergraduate students' choice of the university at the University of Lagos, Nigeria. This finding is similar to that of Budur *et al.* (2018) which shows that campus facilities and academic activities determine university reputation among students in Kurdistan, Iraq. It was however shown in the study that scholarship is not an indicator of university reputation. Moreover, it was shown by Agrey and Lampadan (2014) and Kusumawati *et al.* (2010) that university reputation in areas like academic activities, learning facilities and quality of learning may determine students' choice of university. Munisamy *et al.* (2014) found in their study that university reputation influences students' choice of university.

CONCLUSION

This study was able to establish the fact that undergraduate students of the University of Lagos, Nigeria are aware of university ranking platforms such as the National Universities Commission's universities ranking and Web of University Cybermetrics, which they consider in their choice of university. It was established in the study that university reputation is one important factor also that undergraduates put into consideration when they are choosing their preferred university.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made based on the findings and conclusion:

1. Undergraduate applicants should consider the caliber of academics and researchers in a university before choosing the university.
2. Nigerian university managements should ensure they boost their reputation with factors such as a serene learning environment and beneficial academic activities to be the choice of students.
3. Nigerian universities should consider improving their ranking on the National Universities Commission's universities ranking and Web of University Cybermetrics to attract students to their university.
4. Nigerian universities should continue to produce employable graduates as this helps to boost reputation among undergraduate applicants.

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